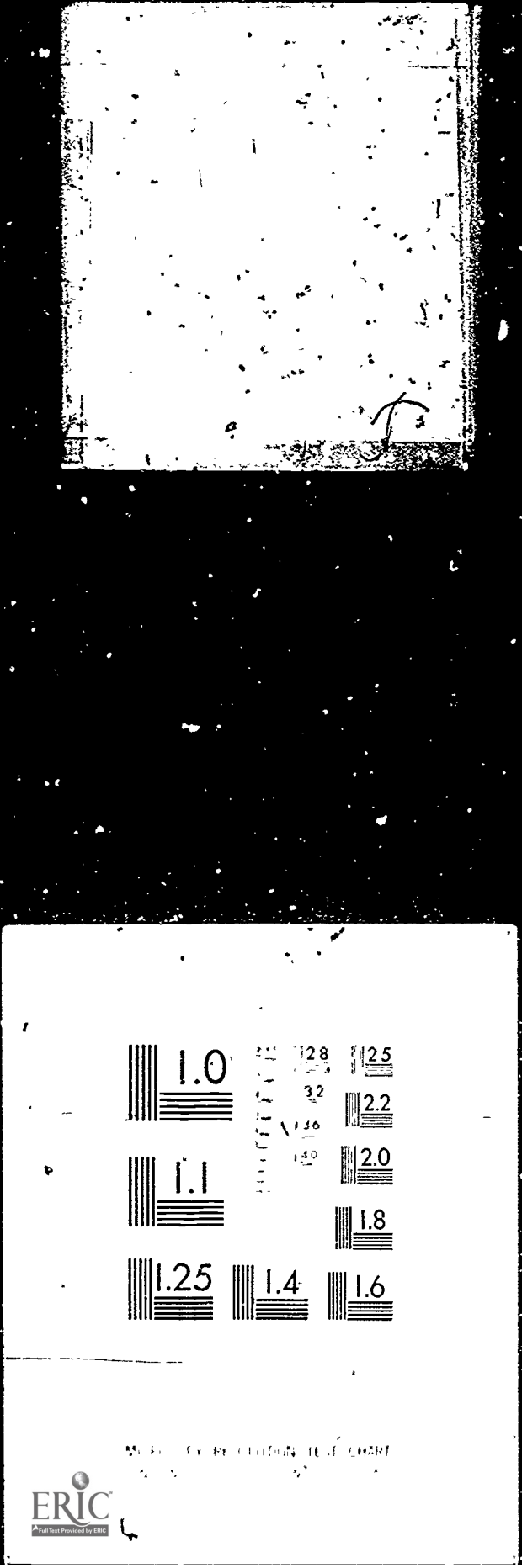
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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 106 972 EA 007 167

AUTHOR Miles, Matthew B.; Lake, Dale G.
TITLE Communication Networks in the Designing and Starting of New Schools.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (60th, Washington, D.C., March 31-April 4, 1975); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Alternative Schools; Communications; *Educational Alternatives; *Educational Planning; Information Dissemination; *Information Sources; *Social Planning

ABSTRACT

Growing dissatisfaction with the linkage of educational research and development information and products to actual school classroom procedures has motivated many researchers and practitioners to uncover new linkage systems. Among the new approaches suggested is that of building on already existing communication networks in schools and across the country, attempting to channel information into these informal networks in a manner and shape more readily useful to school personnel. However, little is currently known about what informal education communication networks exist or how they operate, and even less is known about how long these networks endure or the format of the information transmitted through them. This paper is part of a symposium bringing together researchers and practitioners to explore these underlying questions and suggest future directions for building linkages between research and practice. It discusses research on information networks involved in establishing new or alternative schools. By analyzing data collected at six new schools in New York City, the authors describe the number and duration of networks and the key individuals who compose them. (Author/MLF)

ED106972

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

COMMUNICATION NETWORKS IN THE DESIGNING AND STARTING OF NEW SCHOOLS*

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We are in the early stages of a project entitled "Social Architecture in Education"[1]: it is aimed at studying the planning [illegible] and implementation processes involved in the creation of new innovative schools. As our title implies, we are not so much interested in the processes of physical architecture as ir what it takes to envision and implement an educational social system. There is plenty of evidence from the past decade or so that people who care about the creation of seriously innovative or alternative forms of schooling have had difficulty in creating and sustaining educational settings that fully embody their hopes.

As an early step in our project, we decided to retrieve information from innovative schools we called "old sites" - ones which had recently (that is, in the last four years) opened for students. We wanted to visit these and interview people about the planning and implementation processes they had gone through. We also felt it would be profitable to locate and interview planners - people with repewted experience in the design and implementation of new schools - to discover their rules of thumb and accumulated wisdom. Finally, we wanted to locate a population of new sites - innovative schools which were currently enmeshed in the planning process, so that we could document and analyze the creation of educational settings as it occurred, rather than only retrospectively.

Locating old sites, new sites, and planners presented us with a problem: how to do this rapidly and economically? We will discuss our experience in a moment: for now it's important to remind this audience that the problem is one of ascertaining whether there is anything like one or more networks operating in the new-school business, through which it might be possible to get access to the information we wanted.

Network defined. So what is a network, generally speaking? Dictionary definitions tend to focus on ideas like a "combination of filaments, lines, veins, passages", or an "openwork fabric with lines crossing at regular intervals", "or a dispersed arrangement of parts, components, etc. with intersecting lines of communication", or "an arrangement of conducting elements (resistors, condensors, etc.) connected by conducting wire". Not much help for our purposes, but suggestive.

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* Paper read to symposium on Communication Networks in Education: their Operation and Influence. American Educational Research Association meetings, Washington, D. C., March 30 - April 3, 1975.

[1] Designing and Starting New Schools: a Field Study of Social Architecture in Education. NIE grant NIE-G-74-0051. Matthew B. Miles is Principal Investigator; Dale G. Lake is Co-Principal Investigator.

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Most basically, we consider a network to be a dispersed arrangement of elements (or nodes) connected to each other by "lines". Material, energy or information can travel between nodes along the lines. Some of the elements are simply more "nodal" than others (i.e., have more lines connecting them to other elements).

The networks we are interested in are not abstract, or electrical, or textile. They are social. Thus the elements are people, roles or groups, and the lines are communication channels (face to face contact, phone, mail). What travels over the lines is typically information, rather than energy or materials.

Given presently-available communication media, everyone in the world is in principle connected for information-transmission purposes to everyone else. That "network" is too gross for our purposes. The idea of a communication "network" more usefully implies a connected set of elements and channels which will permit low-energy access to trusted information.

That is: in a good communication network, it is possible with minimal expenditure of energy to give and obtain credible (believable, veridical) information. Electrons are electrons. But when the traveling substance is information, questions of its quality, accuracy, etc. become paramount. The information-seeker at one node needs to know whether the sender at another is honest and not self-deluding, is competent to understand the request, and is willing to transmit the sort of information requested. These assurances are most often met when sender and receiver have had previous face-to-face contact, enough to develop clear, positive views of each others' benevolence, competence and degree of authenticity.

Our retrieval experience. As we have indicated, our need was to locate (rapidly and economically) a set of planners, recently-opened innovative schools, and schools currently being planned which would help us understand more about the design and development of educational settings.

Generally speaking, we proceeded by brainstorming initial contact lists, phoning people on these whom we knew or were connected to by a third party, and asking for suggestions for "old sites", "planners", and "new sites". When we had enough information to decide that a visit to a planner or an old site for an extended interview was worthwhile, we carried out such an interview and asked the interviewee for still more nominations in the three categories. In this way we systematically snowballed our way into a moderate-sized sample of 49 planners, 66 old sites, and 58 new sites. In all cases we indicated our wish to know about "innovative", "interesting", "alternative" schools and their planners; in all cases we stressed that we were focusing on social and educational planning, not physical planning. We also said we wished to stay focused in the Northeast.

It should be emphasized that our approach was not "scientific" in the sense of careful sampling or systematic exhaustion of categories. We simply acted opportunistically to locate as many useful nominations as we could, with as little excess energy expenditure as possible. In a sense, though our prejudices (for example, not expecting much help from national associations) may have limited our findings, our effort may be a reasonably typical exhibit of how people wanting information about new schools burrow their way through whatever "networks" may exist.

When we considered initially how we might go about locating planners, we brainstormed an initial contact list, which included:

2 central office persons
3 national professional associations
1 university researcher
5 consulting firms
4 research and development agencies (independent)
2 Federal officials
2 State officials

Of these, we did not pursue the national associations, nor 4 of the 5 nationally-known consulting firms, nor either Federal official. As it turned out, central office personnel, staffs of alternative schools, intermediate unit personnel, and alternative-school organizations - all of them much closer to the realities of new schools - were those who most frequently could locate planners for us. So, interestingly, could State officials and R & D agency persons - especially those who had worked in other settings previously.

The results of our search process are displayed in Table 1. Categories of persons nominating planners are at the left; those receiving nominations are shown in column headings.

The categories of nominators included the following:

0. A person now involved in the planning of a particular alternative or innovative new school.
1. Staff member (or closely-involved planner) of an alternative school.
2. Central office personnel in a school district (other than supt.).
3. School district line managers (superintendents, principals).
4. Intermediate unit personnel (BOCES in New York, county supt. in New Jersey, ACES in Connecticut).
5. State Department of Education official.
6. Official of voluntary "linking" organization (school study council, league of schools, etc.).
7. Alternative school-focused organization (including National Alternative Schools Program, Center for New Schools).

NOMINATIONS FOR NEW SCHOOL PLANNERS
No. New Jersey to Boston area

TABLE 1

Nominators	Nominated: New school planner (current)	Alt. school staff member	Sch. Dist. (LEA) personnel (non Supt.)	Line managers (LEA) (supts., principals)	Intermed. unit personnel	State Dept. of Ed. officials	Voluntary "linking" organizations	Alt. school-focused organizations	Prof. organizations	Professors, acad. researchers, studs.	Consultant	Independent R & D organ. members	Fed. agency official	Foundation offic	
New school planner (current)											1				1
Alt. school staff member			1	1	1					3	2				8
Sch. Dist. (LEA) personnel (non Supt.)		1	5	2						1					9
Line managers (LEA) (supts., principals)											1				1
Intermed. unit personnel				4		1									5
State Dept. of Ed. officials			1	1						2					4
Voluntary "linking" organizations											1				1
Alt. school-focused organizations		2						2		2					6
Prof. organizations															-
Professors, acad. researchers, studs.						1		1		2		1			5
Consultant						1				1	4				6
Independent R & D organ. members		1	1							2	2	1			7
Fed. agency official		2				1					1				4
Foundation official			1								1				2

8. Professional organization (national or regional, such as AASA, NEA, county school board association).
9. University-based researcher, professor or graduate student.
10. Consultant (includes free-lance and firms).
11. Independent research and development organization member (ex: HUMRRO, Center for Policy Research).
12. Federal agency official.
13. Foundation official

Some general observations can be made about this matrix. First, new-school planners do not seem to be very visible to others; there were 59 nominations, made by 49 people. Only two planners received 3 nominations, and one nomination was typical.[3]

Second, the classes of planner which are least parochial - receive nominations from most other categories - are those of university-based professor/researcher/graduate student, and independent consultant/firm. Universities have often been criticized as havens for those who do not care about school problems, but planners who inhabit them are visible to people in a wide range of other niches, including those in schools and their associated district offices. It's in the interest of consultants, presumably, to be visible.

Third, district central office personnel tend to be most visible to each other, and not to know of any other resources.

Fourth, LEA line managers, such as superintendents and principals, are only visible to intermediate-unit personnel, district personnel, and (in one case) to an SED representative.

Fifth, planners are mentioned only infrequently as residing in intermediate units, linking organizations or R&D organizations, and not at all in foundation or Federal agency settings.

Finally, no one nominates any planner whose primary identity was that of current responsibility for planning a new school. This may be partially an artifact of the slowdown in new-school starts in the last few years, but we suspect that local planners are (a) less likely to have repeated planning experience; (b) not visible to those outside the effort.

In the Washington, D. C. area, the influence on networks is markedly affected by the large county systems. Persons are typically appointed at a central office level to be responsible for the county's building program. These persons are considered planners and are well known throughout the county but not necessarily in an adjoining county.

Outside of such county officials, planners identified were more likely to be known for their national reputation than locally. For example, the few non-county planners identified in the area were nominated by federal officials. These planners had helped start new schools in such desparate locations as Boston and Oregon.

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[3] Cosmopolitans are naturally more visible than locals. Ex: an urban schools planner, formerly a consultant, was nominated by another consultant (who was a former partner), a person from a research and development agency, and a foundation officer who had funded both the planner and the agency. Or, the head of a well-known alternative high school was mentioned by a Federal agency person, (who had gone to the same university as the school head), an R&D researcher (formerly a Federal official), and an assistant superintendent (who had managed a program funded by the official).

Table 2 displays the results of our search for "old sites" in the New York-to-Boston area. Here too we were not interested in being systematic or thorough, but in locating schools which (a) were genuinely "alternative" or "innovative"; (b) had opened in the past 4 years; (c) had some original planners around for interviews. The locations of nominated "old sites" were identified as "metropolitan" (e.g., New York, Hartford, Boston); urban (smaller city); regional (inclu[illegible] urban combinations); suburban; and suburban/rural.

We located a total of 66 "old sites", 41 in the New York metropolitan area, and the remaining spread over northern New Jersey, Connecticut and the Boston metropolitan area. We also located another 25 in the Baltimore-Washington area, but all were located by calling the central office person.

It can be seen that nominations came most frequently from staff members of alternative/innovative schools themselves, central office personnel, intermediate unit persons, an alternative schools organization, and state department of education personnel. But those generalizations mask the fact that the many nominations (for 34 of the 66 schools) came from persons who seemed to be at central "nodes" in the network of information flow about new schools: (1) a metropolitan facilities planner with a strong interest in alternative programs; (2) an official of a national clearing house for alternative schools; (3) the Title III coordinator in a state department of education; (4) a university researcher who had just completed a national tour of alternative-like schools. Nominations were frequent from staff members of alternative/innovative schools, and from intermediate-unit personnel, but were scattered; no centrally-"nodal" persons were found, except in the Baltimore-Washington area.

New Sites. As Table 2 shows, the 66 sites received a total of 84 nominations; here to repeat nominations are not frequent. Our records indicate that only five sites received as many as 3 nominations, and one 4. All but one were alternative schools in suburban settings; the other metropolitan. The most frequent nominators of these "visible" schools were staff members of other schools, university personnel, and linking agency members. Table 2 also indicates that certain categories of nominators show up very infrequently or not at all: people presently planning new schools; school district managers; professional organizations; consultants; R&D agencies; Federal agencies; foundations. There are some differences here from the implied somewhat more diffuse network of "planners" reviewed above, which may well stem from our early luck in locating "nodal" types.

Table 3 shows the results of our search for "new sites" - schools opening in the fall of 1975 or 1976. Since these were schools which we might potentially be studying closely during the planning and development process, they had to be relatively close (50 miles) to our geographical base in the New York metropolitan area,[4] and we said so to those we requested nominations from.

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[4] We also carried out a search in the Baltimore-Washington area. Once again, the county system made the search somewhat easier. One person in each county knew what new schools were being developed. Thus, seven people identified all the new starts within an area of fifty miles of Washington.

NOMINATIONS FOR RECENTLY-OPENED INNOVATIVE SCHOOLS
OLD SITES: No. N.J. to Boston area

TABLE 2

	Nominators	Nature of nominated site				Location of nominated site					
		Alter. SWS	Alter. Whole School	Innov. School	Unknown	Metro-politan	Smaller city	Regional city/sub.	Suburban	Sub./ rural	
0	New school planner (current)										
1	Alt. school staff member	2	6	1	4	3	1		9		13
2	Sch. Dist. (LEA) personnel (non Supt.)	1	5	6	3	15					15
3	Line managers (LEA) (supts., principals)	1			1		1		1		2
4	Intermed. unit personnel	2	2	2	3				8	1	9
5	State Dept. of Ed. officials	3	3	2	2	3	1	1	4	1	10
6	Voluntary "linking" organizations	1	3	1	2	1			6		7
7	Alt. school-focused organizations	2	13			6	1	1	7		15
8	Prof. organizations			1					1		1
9	Professors acad. researchers, studs.	2	2	3	3	3			7		10
10	Consultant		1			1					1
11	Independent R & D organ. members										
12	Fed. agency official		1			1					1
13	Foundation official										

Alternate SWS: an "alternative" program operating as a school-within-a-school.
Alternate whole school: an "alternative" program operating as an entire school within an LEA.
Innovative: a school not defined differently enough from "mainstream" schools to be called "alternative", but including features claimed to be new, innovative, non-traditional, etc.
Unknown: school characteristics not ascertained.

TABLE 3

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Nominators	Nature of nominated site				Location of nominated site						
	Alter. SW.	Alter. Whole School	Innov. School	Unknown	Metro-politan	Smaller city	Regional city/sub.	Suburban	Sub./ rural	New town	
New school planner (current)			1		1						1
Alt. school staff member		2		2	1	1		1	1		4
Sch. Dist. (LEA) personnel (non Supt.		2	4	3	7					1	8
Lin. managers (LEA) (Supts., principals)				2				2			2
Intermed. unit personnel	1		3	34		4	3	20	10		37
State Dept. of Ed. officials			3	5		3		3		1	7
Voluntary "linking" organizations			1	1	1		1				2
Alt. school-focused organizations	1							1			1
Prof. organizations				1				1			1
Professors, acad. researchers, studs.	1		3	2				6			6
Consultant			2	3		1		3		1	5
Independent R & D organ. members											
Fed. agency official											
Foundation official											

Several observations and comments can be made. First, as many people have expected, the rate of new-school creation is down somewhat; we located only 3[illegible] sites in [illegible] York, and [illegible] Connecticut. (It should be noted that the 38 sites in New Jersey included all new buildings going up in this self-imposed geographical area; for most of these the "innovative" or "alternative" designation is dubious, and in any event is unknown as of this writing (see the large proportion in the "unknown" column). Intermediate level units in suburban New York reported that almost no new building was occurring.[5]

Another way of viewing these data is that we encountered only 25 nominations (most of them non-repeated) for new schools clearly identified as non-traditional, and only 7 of these nominations could be characterized as "alternative-like", in the sense of presenting a pervasive, holistic program with structural and social characteristics that represented a serious alternative to usual ways of organizing and conceptualizing schooling.

Second, it appears that intermediate-level unit personnel, and urban central office personnel, followed by State department and university personnel and consultants are most likely to know of new schools. Surprisingly enough, voluntary linking organizations were not of much help, nor were alternative school-focused organizations. We drew a blank with the people in settings out of the main stream of educational operations (R&D agencies, federal agency personnel, foundation officials) with whom we spoke.

Third, the locations of new sites are more diverse than those of the "old sites" seen in Table 2; more smaller-city, and suburban/rural sites are nominated.

A final comment is that interesting new schools are largely "invisible" to others: among the 66 sites there are only 7 new schools which are mentioned by two persons, and none was mentioned by three. The six included 2 metropolitan, 3 suburban, and 2 regional schools. This so-called invisibility may be an artifact of our search methods, but the fact is that we experienced a good deal of difficulty in getting the sort of information we were looking for, often drew blanks, etc.

New Site Information. At this point our data bout the information flow into new sites is limited to three. Of these three we asked how frequently new site personnel utilized each of the following:

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[5] It's of some interest that our New York State department nominator at first said that there were no new innovative schools at all being planned in our geographical area (largely suburban), while suggesting a dozen such schools upstate; after some pressing by us, he suggested 4 additional nearby sites.

a - State [illegible]
b - [illegible] R&D center
c - [illegible]
d - Conferences [illegible]
e - Specialist in your own district or school
f - Other teachers or administrators in your district
g - Observation of innovative practices in other schools or districts
h - In-service training
i - Research reports or monographs
j - Mass media (books by non-professionals, magazines, TV)
k - Pre-service training
l - Text books, manuals, curriculum guides
m - Local school board
o - Abstracts or documents ERIC
p - Other sources of information or advice

The most frequently used source was item (f) - Other teachers or administrators in your district school. Second most frequent was (g) - Observation of innovative practices in other schools; followed by (e) - Specialists in your district or school.

Used not at all was abstracts or documents from ERIC.

While we must be cautious with only three sites in our sample it does appear that there is a preference for local sources rather national or mass media sources.

Our analysis so far would lead us to conclude that there is minimal use of networks in the sense of channels for "rapid access to trusted information.

Secondly, redundancy, a property thought to be important in other types of networks was almost non-existent in our findings as witnessed by the low number of multiple nominations in relation to planners and old sites.

In school systems organized into large county systems, information sources seem much more easily identified within but not across counties.

As compared to other studies of networks, the spread of information in new sites appears to be more like that of agriculture in the sense that local resources are utilized more than professional research or opinion.

It does appear that insofar as there are networks, the structure differs somewhat according to the type of information being sought. For example: for planners, the most useful nominators seem to be those who are closest to new schools; for recently-opened schools, a small set of centrally-nodal people accounted for many nominations, along with school staff members and intermediate-unit personnel; for schools still being planned, the best nominators are "official" ones (intermediate-level unit personnel, central office people, and State department persons). University-based persons were frequent nominators in all three areas, as were consultants for the question of planners and new sites.